

Case Study #2 – CANADA BUSINESS

1. Background

Small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) are the backbone of Canada's economy. The network of Canada Business Service Centres (CBSCs) was originally launched as a pilot project in 1992 in Halifax, Edmonton and Winnipeg to raise awareness of the various government programs and services available to Canadian entrepreneurs and to provide an easy and convenient source to access business information from various departments and jurisdictions.

In 1994, the CBSC network was launched as a partnership between Industry Canada, Western Economic Diversification Canada, Atlantic Canada Opportunities Agency and Economic Development Agency of Canada for the Regions of Quebec. In 2000, the federal Government On-line initiative funded Industry Canada to create the Business Gateway, a federal internet portal for business services. In 2004, the CBSC network came together with Business Gateway to form "Canada Business": to deliver "click, call and visit" services to entrepreneurs across Canada. This rationalization was part of the Government of Canada's service-to-business vision to streamline and integrate service delivery with the goal of strengthening SMEs and supporting Canadian competitiveness in key sectors.

The aim of the program is to reduce the complexity and burden of dealing with various levels of government, thereby strengthening small and medium-sized enterprises and increase Canadian competitiveness in key sectors.

The mission of Canada Business is four-fold:

- 1) Improve the start-up, survival and growth rates of SMEs by giving business people in every part of Canada access to accurate, timely and relevant information and referrals.
- 2) Reduce the complexity of dealing with various levels of government by consolidating business information from the clients' perspective in one convenient service.
- 3) Enable clients to make well-informed business decisions in a global economy.
- 4) Encourage business success through sound business planning, market research and the use of strategic business information.

Building and maintaining effective partnerships with provincial/territorial governments is time-consuming and on-going. Delivering cohesive, consistent service throughout variety regional partnerships requires care and attention. Ensuring continuous service enhancement and sustaining the attendant information technology solutions is an on-going innovation challenge.

Canada Business is an integral part of a broad government-wide service transformation. The intent was to streamline and integrate service delivery. Canada Business has won a number of awards, including one from the United Nations for improved public service.

2. Organizational Design and Governance Arrangements

Canada Business is a federal-provincial/territorial partnership. The program is coordinated by a National Secretariat at Industry Canada, and is managed federally by the Regional Development Agencies. A variety of collaborative arrangements are in place with provincial/territorial governments and some not-for-profit organizations. In-person services in each region are augmented through local partnerships, and may include access to additional business-related resources, seminars or advisory services. For example, in Western Canada, each of the four provincial governments provides 30-50% of the core operating costs for the service centres providing resources to supplement the core Canada Business offerings.

The regional development agencies are accountable for the operations of the service centres in their respective areas of jurisdiction and they report annually through their departmental Reports on Plans and Priorities and Departmental Performance Reports. In addition, Industry Canada reports on the national online services.

3. Business Model

The business model for Canada Business is somewhat unique within government. It is a service delivered in collaboration among federal and provincial/territorial governments and some not-for-profit organizations. The focus is client-centric, providing seamless and integrated service across levels of government.

3(a) Activities, Channels and Migration

Canada Business' multi-channel network includes integrated national/provincial/territorial websites, a national toll-free telephone information and referral service and 13 service centres across Canada providing in-person assistance to clients from experienced staff in areas such as business planning and market research. The community reach is augmented through 435 regional access partners providing services across Canada.

Web-based services include the award-winning Business Start-up Assistant, an Interactive Business Planner, the On-line Small Business Workshop, an extensive collection of Info-Guides and How-to Guides, and the Business Information System that describes government programs, services and regulations at the federal and provincial or territorial level.

The service is offered over the Internet, by telephone and in-person. Officer-assisted channels of service promote the online channel to clients. Online services continue to be enhanced and refined to meet changing client needs.

Over time, client interactions have migrated substantially to the online channel. Fax-back service was dropped a few years ago due to greatly diminished client demand. An

integrated telephone-web channel was also dropped. Ironically, it was a bit ahead of its time and clients did not seem to understand how it worked.

3(b) Funding

Canada Business has been funded federally since 1994 at an average rate of \$15 million per year. Cost-sharing arrangements with different provincial/territorial governments vary across the country and contribute to funding at the local level. Core services are offered free of charge; some centres charge for supplementary services.

3(c) Human Resources Issues

Staffing arrangements vary across the network. Some employees are federal, others are provincial or contract. HR practices are accordingly not uniform across the network. Staff training is provided by regional managers and is on-going.

3(d) Performance Measurement

Regular statistical reporting is provided to centre managers and to managing partners. (In FY 2005-06, the demand for Canada Business services continued to grow. Almost 7 million web visits and almost 300,000 officer-assisted requests were served, the later primarily by telephone and walk-in service. During the same year, more than 45,000 new business plans were created using the Canada Business Interactive Business Planner tool.)

Periodic client satisfaction surveys are undertaken, as well as usability testing of online services and formal public opinion research.

3(e) Use of Information Technology/Web 2.0

Shared information technology is the foundation of the Canada Business Network. Partners all use the Industry Canada IT backbone. Standard online services are accessed throughout the series of regional web sites.

Canada Business has already implemented pilot projects using RSS feeds/content syndication and pod casts with its partners across the country. However, Canada Business has yet to determine how best to leverage other elements of Web 2.0, including blogs and social networking as part of its offerings to business clients.

3(f) Partnerships

The program makes extensive use of partnerships and inter-jurisdictional collaboration, as outlined above. Individual service centres collaborate with business intermediaries at the regional level, and the National Secretariat engages intermediaries at the national

level. Centres each develop their own partnerships with regional access partners, including economic development agencies and other community-based organizations.

4. Community Engagement

As outlined above, individual centres have outreach programs to local and community service providers. The advantages include more comprehensive service to clients, and simplified access to those services. Challenges include maintaining consistent levels of service across the country and shared accountability. See above.

5. Issues Encountered/Challenges

Important challenges include securing on-going funding, evolving service delivery, keeping partners satisfied and engaged, aligning strategic priorities among different levels of government, and providing stable information technology to the network.

Since Canada Business is a network with considerable regional variation in funding and service priorities, it faces a continual challenge to maintain a cohesive and consistent service. A significant investment in communications, achieved through a variety of committees and communities of practice, contributes to a shared vision and sense of purpose and allows the network to exploit efficiencies.

Like many government organizations, Canada Business is faced with the challenge of developing information and services that are well suited for delivery over the Internet. Established prior to the emergence of the Internet as a dominant service delivery channel, Canada Business is striving to transform its business model to one that is driven by researching client needs, and the application of user-centered design practices to produce information and services that can be easily and conveniently consumed on the Internet.

6. Critical Success Factors

Regular client satisfaction surveys consistently demonstrate the usefulness and benefits of the services which meets an important need. Clients appreciate especially the inter-jurisdictional nature of the service.

7. Next Steps

Canada Business is currently implementing a unified content strategy and approach to the creation, management and publication of information to the family of Canada Business web sites. This significant change requires commitment to the concept of enterprise or shared responsibility for the creation, use and reuse of information. This transformation will continue over the next several years as numerous changes are implemented relating to the development of information across the Canada Business network, and how the information is reviewed and approved for publication to the family

of web sites. The introduction of an enterprise content management solution to support this unified approach has been extremely challenging for the entire network as a result of insufficient understanding of the implications of the project, and challenges with change management in its early phases. The organization has embarked on a concerted consultation and training effort to address these issues.

In addition, Canada Business has also begun to examine ways to exploit emerging web technologies and approaches, commonly referred to as Web 2.0.

The program is currently under-going a formal strategic review to address the manner in which services to business clients should evolve in the future.

Contact:

Mary O'Keefe,
Service Delivery and Partnerships,
Industry Canada.
Telephone: 613-946-5285
E-mail: O'Keefe.Mary@ic.gc.ca